

## A Christian in the Land of the Gods

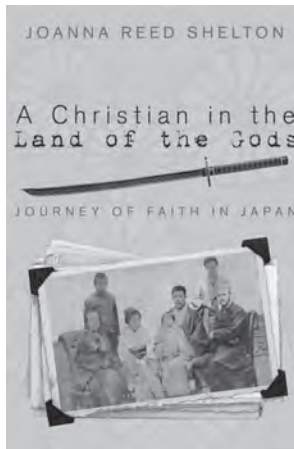
### *Journey of Faith In Japan*

By JOANNA REED SHELTON

EUGENE, OREGON: CASCADE BOOKS, 2016

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Reviewed by Daniel A. Métraux



Joanna Reed Shelton's recent book, *A Christian in the Land of the Gods*, is a beautifully written biography of her great-grandfather, the Reverend Thomas Theron Alexander (1850–1902), and her great-grandmother, Emma Edwina Alexander (1855–1937), who served as Presbyterian missionaries and teachers in Japan from 1877 to 1902. The value of this work is enhanced by the author's in-depth analysis of the great difficulties foreign missionaries and teachers had in introducing Christianity into a strongly resistant society and Japan's aversion to foreign influences while simultaneously rapidly modernizing itself during the Meiji period (1868–1912).

Thomas Alexander was born and raised on a small farm at Mount Horeb in eastern Tennessee. He graduated from Maryville College and soon after attended the Union Theological Seminary in New York. He graduated in May 1877 and several weeks later became licensed as a Presbyterian minister. That same month, he married the love of his life, Emma Brown, one of the first female graduates of Maryville College. The newly married couple declined calls from several American churches in favor of an opportunity to work as missionaries in Japan. They set out for Tokyo in October 1877 and made Japan their permanent home. Thomas rarely left Japan and died in 1902 while still busy at work in his adopted country.

Thomas was a very dedicated and hardworking missionary and teacher who traveled all over Japan, founding several churches and teaching at such universities as Meiji Gakuin in Tokyo and Doshisha in Kyoto. He became fluent in Japanese and wrote several books and many articles on various aspects of Christianity. Some of his churches are still open and in operation today.

Life as a missionary was at times difficult for Thomas and Emma. Emma bore seven children, including two girls who died and are buried in Japan. They had to move frequently, as Thomas was charged with the opening of new churches all over Japan. They suffered from many ailments and fevers, and lived in fear of fires and earthquakes and in difficult housing. They continually faced polluted drinking water and poor food, but they worked hard and persevered as a strong family.

#### Christianity and Japanese Nationalism

A key feature of Shelton's book is the question of the place and role of Christianity in a highly nationalistic Japan. Despite missionary efforts dating back to the 1850s, today only between 1 and 2 percent of Japanese call themselves Christian. Why is it that Christianity has not found fertile soil in Japan, when it has had such great success in places like South Korea, the Philippines, and, to a more limited extent, China?

The Japanese government regarded Christianity as a potentially subversive force in the early 1600s and enforced a ban on the religion until 1873. Although Christianity remained officially banned early in the Meiji period, Japanese leaders tolerated foreign missionaries as an inexpensive source of Western learning and languages, which they viewed as an essential element of Western power, along with military strength. Many young Japanese, hoping to develop prestigious careers and realizing that a working knowledge of English and Western ways would help them do so, flocked to missionary schools and even converted to Christianity. Some of these conversions were sincere, while others were not.

### *The Japanese government regarded Christianity as a potentially subversive force in the early 1600s and enforced a ban on the religion until 1873.*

Despite this early enthusiasm for missionaries and Christianity, there was already a significant backlash against Japanese Christians. Some of their countrymen in areas such as Kanazawa “scorned Christians as being unpatriotic and not completely Japanese” (54). Some Buddhist priests in more rural areas wrote anti-Christian pamphlets and booklets condemning Christians as being traitors to their country. They “accused Japanese Christians of disloyalty and of undermining the nation” (75).

Nationalistic pride swelled in the 1890s while Japan emerged on the world scene as an important military and industrial power. An appreciation for traditional values rose among many Japanese. Life for missionaries like Thomas as well as Japan's new Christians grew more difficult: “Nationalists attacked Christians as being un-Japanese and their religion

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as being incompatible with patriotism and loyalty to the emperor” (166). Anti-Christian feelings reached a height of intensity in the early 1900s and continued into World War II, when all elements of American and Western thought were condemned.

Despite these setbacks, Thomas and other missionaries and teachers continued their activities deep into the Meiji period. Churches survived, and many continue to survive to this day. Christian colleges, especially women’s schools such as Doshisha Women’s College in Kyoto and Tokyo Joshi Daigaku, continued to attract growing numbers of students. There was also a solid core of Japanese Christians, many from ranking samurai families, who began to replace foreign missionaries as clergy and teachers. These Japanese Christians built the nucleus of a small but important Christian segment of Japanese society.

Shelton strongly emphasizes the importance of foreign missionaries, teachers, and diplomats like her great-grandfather, who “played an indispensable role in bringing Western knowledge, technology, culture, and religion to Japan, helping the country in its efforts to modernize and embrace the outside world” (228). When Thomas died, a samurai-turned-Christian said of him, “He died for Japan.” Interestingly, Thomas’s daughters Emma and Mary returned to Japan after their father’s death to teach in Japanese schools—sadly, Emma died in Japan shortly after settling there.

Despite the failures by Western missionaries and teachers to make Christianity a guiding force in Japan, Shelton correctly points out that their efforts have not been in vain. Christians have played a major role in developing higher education in Japan. Christian schools like Doshisha University in Kyoto and Meiji Gakuin in Tokyo even now provide strong liberal arts educations to tens of thousands of Japanese students every year. Christian schools at all levels have played and continue to play a critical role in providing educational opportunities for women that were not available before the Meiji Era. Japanese Christians have also played a disproportionate leadership role throughout Japanese society. There have been eight Christian prime ministers in Japan, and many Christian cabinet members and other leaders throughout Japanese society.

Shelton, who had a very successful career as an economist and was the US Treasury’s top Japan economist, was delighted in 2006 to receive an invitation from the Osaka Suita South Church, which her great-grandfather founded in 1886, to help them celebrate their 120th anniversary. Shelton attended the ceremony and gave a talk about the important role that her family played as missionaries in Japan.

Several missionary teachers in early Meiji Japan, notably William Elliot Griffis and E. Warren Clark, rationalized the failure of foreign missionaries to convert many Christians in Japan by asserting that young Japanese of the 1870s were, in fact, “latent Christians.” They may not have actively practiced the religion, but they shared many of the characteristics of Protestant Christianity such as honor, hard work, education, and honesty. It was they who could best transport “Anglo-Saxon” civilization to the rest of Asia.

Shelton’s *A Christian in the Land of the Gods* is a thought-provoking book that is both a well-written biography and a shrewd analysis of the long-term impact of Christianity in Japan in the past and in the present day. She offers a penetrating view of the deep courage, hardships, and challenges faced by nineteenth-century missionaries working to plant their faith in a country that was just emerging from almost three centuries of self-imposed isolation. We are fortunate that her great-grandfather kept an in-depth journal of his life in Japan. This work is strongly recommended for any person interested in the history of Christianity and Christian education in Japan during the Meiji period and beyond. ■

DANIEL A. MÉTRAUX is Professor Emeritus and Adjunct Professor of Asian Studies at Mary Baldwin University in Virginia. He has served as President of the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies and Editor of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*. Currently Editor of the *Virginia Review of Asian Studies*, he has written extensively on Japanese history, politics, and religion, including several books and articles on Japan’s Soka Gakkai Buddhist movement. His most recent book is *The Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony Farm and the Creation of Japanese America* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

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